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An Investigation of the Readers' Theatre Production Style

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AN INVESTIGATION OF THE READERS' THEATRE PRODUCTION STYLE

by

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INTRODUCTION

Purpose and Justification

> It is a lovely paradox of this gadget-filled day, this heyday of visual aids, that the original show of history--a man talking--is becoming the latest sensation. The leading attraction in the world is still Homer reciting from the tail of a cart.[1]

This statement by Simeon Stylites, drama critic for The Christian Century, was made in reference to the number of Readers' Theatre performances on the Broadway stage in 1952. From the first presentation of George Bernard Shaw's Don Juan in Hell in August, 1951, this type of dramatic entertainment has become increasingly popular with American audiences.

Although every year more high schools and colleges as well as professional groups are giving Readers' Theatre productions, there has not been a methodical study of this production style. Sketchy evaluations by a few theorists have attempted to link Readers' Theatre techniques directly with oral interpretation techniques. Directors of Readers' Theatres have discussed methods of producing reading performances, and drama critics have commented on professional productions. No composite study has been made, however, of the nature of this style

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[1] Simeon Stylites, "Hope for the Ear," The Christian Century, LXIX (April 23, 1952), 488.

of presentation. This thesis, therefore, will investigate the Readers' Theatre production style in an effort to determine its nature. This paper does not attempt to formulate practical suggestions on producing Readers' Theatre programs, but may provide directors of this type of theatre with a basic theory from which to operate.

Methods and Methodology

The basic material for this study will be provided by three sources: theories by experts in the area of oral interpretation, reviews by drama critics of professional presentations both on and off Broadway, and first-hand observation by the writer of both professional and amateur productions.

A discussion and analysis of the different types of Readers' Theatre presentations will be set forth in this paper. Particular emphasis will be given to the style of theatre productions which are similar to the Readers' Theatre style, the treatment of materials, the role of the performers, the performer - audience relationship, and the appeal to the audience of the Readers' Theatre presentation.

Historical and theoretical background will be discussed in Chapter I as a first step in the investigation of the Readers' Theatre production style. Emphasis will be placed on two possible links with Readers' Theatre style: the role of the interpretative reader of drama, and the presentational staging of drama.

CHAPTER I

HISTORICAL BASIS AND DEFINITION OF THE READERS' THEATRE

The concept of Readers' Theatre is not new. Apart from staged productions, for centuries there has been a kind of dramatic entertainment comparable to present day Readers' Theatre presentations. In A Source Book in Theatrical History, A. M. Nagler states that a characteristic feature of the later Roman stage was "The separation of elocution and mimetic action in lyrical monodies."[1] Plays were recited by a single reader, while actors accompanied the reading with silent gesticulation. Some authorities believe that the plays of Seneca were designed to be recited in this manner. Beare states that under the Empire the Roman of the literary class "regarded the theatre with something like horror."[2] Both Harsh and Beare deduced from the internal evidence of Seneca's plays that the author had not sufficiently visualized the actions of his characters for a staged performance. "The Senecan tragedies are simply artificial imitations of Greek tragedy, and they are meant to be read or declamed, not to be acted."[3]

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[1] A. M. Nagler, A Source Book in Theatrical History (New York: Dover Publications, 1952), p. 17.

[2] W. Beare, The Roman Stage (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), p. 227.

[3] Ibid.

Beare further states:

> The position of comedy under the Empire was no better than that of tragedy. The very word comoedus is used of a slave who reads extracts from comedy as an entertainment for guests at dinner. . . Purely literary comedies were composed. Pliny tells us that he has heard Vergilius Romanus "reading to a few listeners" his imitation of Old Greek comedy. . . Pliny speaks of comedy, as well as tragedy, as suitable for declamation.[4]

Harsh also states that during Seneca's time, public readings by an author had become one of the features of the literary activity at Rome.[5]

There is the belief among authorities that some of the early dramas of the Middle Ages were read rather than acted. One early dramatic form of the medieval period seemed particularly suited to a reading rather than a staged treatment. The elegiac comedy contained speeches which appeared as direct discourse separated by narrative passages in the third person.[6] Young describes how these elegiac comedies might have been produced.

> As to the manner in which the elegiac comedies were spoken we have no positive evidence. Presumably they were commonly recited in a semi-dramatic way by minstrels or other performers. Possibly the speeches provided for the several characters were sometimes delivered by separate persons, and probably the persons engaged in the

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[4] Ibid., p. 229.

[5] Philip Whaley Harsh, A Handbook of Classical Drama (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1944), p. 404.

[6] Elegiac comedies were usually brief compositions in Latin, drawing their subject-matter partly from Terence and partly from contemporary life, but modelling their form more or less directly from Ovid's poetry.

> recital sometimes used gestures and changes of voice by way of suggesting impersonation; but we have no assurance that they were performed as plays with complete use of impersonation and scenery.[7]

Young's analysis of the possible production form for the elegiac comedy is very close to the style used for some Readers' Theatre productions today.

There is some evidence that a form of Readers' Theatre was produced by university students in colonial America. In The Annals of the New York Stage there is an account of a "pastoral colloquy" which was recited in 1702 by the scholars of William and Mary College before the governor in Williamsburg.[8]

The presence of Readers' Theatre type performances in the past is not really so unusual when it is considered that some of this style's characteristics were also an important part of staged dramas in the past. Two possible characteristics of the Reader's Theatre are a presentational method of staging which results in a closer relationship between audience and performer, and a strong appeal to the audience to use its imagination. Representational staging became the most popular style in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and has remained a mainstay of popular theatre today because of audience's desire for realistic theatre in our times. In the older method of staging drama, presentationalism, there had always been a link between audience and

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[7]Karl Young, The Drama of the Medieval Church (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), I, 5.

[8]George C. D. Odell, The Annals of the New York Stage (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927), I, 4.

actor with a greater appeal to the audience to use its imagination. A brief study of presentationalism will, therefore, aid in an understanding of the Readers' Theatre style and will also illustrate that this style is not unique but is linked to the oldest method of staging drama, presentationalism.

As a background for this discussion, a definition of the terms, representational and presentational, is first necessary. In representational or illusory staging, the theatre becomes a place where life is more completely represented; and the audience views the action through the "fourth wall." There is generally no attempt to link the audience with the actor in a direct manner.

In a presentational or non-illusory production, the audience is asked to accept the stage as "a platform where the drama is acted out or presented and is theatrical because the production is admittedly on a stage."[9] Since fewer realistic details are given, the audience is asked to use its imagination. The spectator also retains his freedom as an observer, but he must accept "a series of conventions or rules of procedure."[10] As in a reading performance, aesthetic distance is greater, and the relationship between spectator and performer is closer.

> The actor, the audience, and the performance exist within the same psychologically undifferentiated world. The actor is therefore permitted to communicate directly

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[9] John Dietrich, Play Production (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1953), p. 395.

[10] Ibid.

> for both occupy the same world of aesthetic actuality.[11]

I should now like to examine briefly the dramas of three periods of theatre to show how each has contributed presentational elements which are a part of the present day Readers' Theatre. The classic Greek of the 5th century B.C., the Elizabethan, and the 17th and 18th century English periods are to be considered.

The first characteristic of the Greek drama of the 5th century B.C. which can be compared with a characteristic of present day Readers' Theatre is the necessity of the spectator to use his imagination. Within the drama were two narrative elements which required this: the chorus and the messenger. For example, the chorus served such practical functions as describing scenes for the audience and relating past events necessary to the understanding of the drama itself. An example of the latter is the entrance speech of the chorus in Aeschylus' Agamemnon.

> Ten years since the great contestants
> of Priam's right,
> Menelaus and Agamemnon, my lord,
> twin throned, twin sceptered, in twofold power
> of kings, from God, the Atreidae,
> put forth from this shore
> the thousand ships of the Argives,
> the strength and the armies.
> . . . So drives Zeus the great god
> the Atreidae against Alexander:
> for one woman's promiscuous sake.[12]

The use of the messenger was an even stronger narrative element in Greek drama, especially in the tragedies, for several reasons:

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[11] Earle Ernst, The Kabuki Theatre (New York: Grove Press, 1956), p. 18

[12] Aeschylus, Oresteia, lines 40-45, 60-65, Richard Lattimore (trans.), The Complete Greek Tragedies (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), I, 36-37.

scene changes were not a part of the convention; at the most there were only three actors. In many Greek plays, events which happened in a different locale from that depicted on stage needed to be explained; and tradition and taste demanded that violence not be shown on the stage. It was up to the audience, therefore, to make use of its imagination to visualize the scene and events. A messenger, then, related the details of Jocasta's death and the particulars of Oedipus' putting out his eyes.

The second characteristic of the Greek drama which can be compared with the Readers' Theatre is direct address to the audience. Under Euripides, the prologue and epilogue were added to the drama.[13] It was in the comedies of Aristophanes, however, that the closest link between actor and audience was developed. The parabasis became a kind of mouthpiece for the dramatist. Here "the chorus made a long address to the audience, which aired the author's opinions and often had nothing to do with the play."[14] For example, in two plays, The Acharnians and Peace, Aristophanes boasts about his achievements as a poet and wise counsel. Unlike the prologue and epilogue, the parabasis was delivered in the middle of the drama and became by this position, as well as its content, a stronger presentational element in the drama.

An even more direct comparison can be made between the Elizabethan drama and the Readers' Theatre. The use of the imagination by the

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[13] H.D.F. Kitto, Greek Tragedy (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1950), p. 294.

[14] Edith Hamilton, The Greek Way to Western Civilization (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1942), p. 66.

spectator was an important element for the enjoyment of the play. Most of the public playhouses were formalistic, and little attempt was made to use much scenery. As a result, Shakespeare in his Antony and Cleopatra has no less than forty-three changes of scene. In Shakespeare's dramas, language most often set the scene. Audiences would have to imagine that the stage was Cleopatra's barge, the Forest of Arden, or the royal courtyard at Elsinor. John Mason Brown in his discussion of the Don Juan in Hell production makes a direct comparison between this Reader's Theatre presentation and Shakespeare's use of language.

> And here was Shaw proving, as Shakespeare demonstrated long ago, how unnecessary scenery is when great language sets the stage. Shakespeare relied on his characters to do the brushwork contemporaries assume designers will.[15]

In Henry V, Shakespeare combines the two presentational elements of imagination and direct address. The chorus in the prologue addresses the audience and calls attention to the stage itself.

> . . . Pardon, gentles all,
> The flat unraised spirits that have dared
> On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
> So great an object. Can this cockpit hold
> The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram
> Within this wooden O the very casques
> That did affright the air at Agincourt?
> Suppose within the girdle of these walls
> Are now confined two mighty monarchies.[16]

In Shakespeare's dramas we find individual characters occasionally approaching the audience and advising them on what was to happen or

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[16] John Mason Brown, "What Shaw Again?", Saturday Review of Literature, XXIV (November 10, 1951), 22.

[17] William Shakespeare, King Henry V, Act I, Scene I, Lines 9-14.

what they should think. Thus, Richard in Richard III opens the play by expressing his deep aversion to his deformity which makes him such a loathsome creature that in order to gain recognition he will obtain the crown through treacherous means. Iago in Othello asks a question of the audience, "And what's he then that says I play the villain?"[18]

A presentational element designed especially for the benefit of the audience's understanding was the aside. Used throughout the plays, the aside provided the actor direct communication with the audience.

In the English comedies of the 17th and 18th centuries, an even stronger link was formed between audience and actor. As in Readers' Theatre, complete enjoyment of the performance depended upon a direct relationship between the two groups. The plays began with a prologue and ended with an epilogue in which one of the actors, representing a character in the play, spoke to the members of the audience. During the period, the prologue employed comment on the content of the play. The aside also became more widely used in the comedies as a means to entertain the audience. For example, in She Stoops to Conquer, the amazement and indignation of the dignified Mr. Hardcastle at being taken for an innkeeper are elaborated through asides to heighten the humor of the scene. The audience can then understand and enjoy fully what each character is thinking. As in Elizabethan dramas, characters would sometimes come forward and confide to the audience about their thoughts

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[18]Shakespeare, Othello, Act II, Scene III, line 341.

or previous exploits. In the 18th century comedy, however, these were always given to amuse and delight the audience. In Sheridan's The Rivals, after Mrs. Malaprop has left, Lucy tells the audience what a clever girl she is.

> Ha! ha! ha! - So, my dear simplicity, let me give you a little respite - let girls in my station be as fond as they please of appearing expert, and knowing their trusts - commend me to a mask of silliness, and a pair of sharp eyes for my own interest under it! Let me see to what account have I turned my simplicity lately - For abetting Miss Lydia Languish in a design of running away with an Ensign! in money - sundry times - twelve pound twelve - gowns, five - hats, ruffles, caps, etc. etc., numberless! From the said Ensign, within this last month, six guineas and a half; about a quarter's pay! . . . [19]

This use of direct address, as in the last quotation, is an example of one of the presentational elements which has been developed through three great theatrical periods of the past: The Greek, the Elizabethan, and the Restoration. Under Euripides the chorus addressed the audience directly in the prologue and the epilogue. Aristophanes added the parabasis in the middle of the drama. Elizabethan drama added the aside and direct address by one character within the action of the play itself. Restoration comedy emphasized these for a more complete enjoyment of the drama. Readers' Theatre in making an even stronger overall use of such an approach to the drama is employing an acceptable and universal

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[19] Richard Sheridan, The Rivals, Act I, Scene II.

element in the presentational theatre of the past. The Greek and Elizabethan audiences were also called upon to use their imagination. This, too, was an acceptable element in the theatre of the past and is also an important element in the Readers' Theatre. The production style of the Readers' Theatre is, therefore, not entirely unique.

Today there is also some basis for an acceptance of the Readers' Theatre production style with its emphasis on presentationalism. Playwrights are again writing dramas with presentational elements. Almost every high school graduate is familiar with at least one of these plays, Our Town. Among famous playwrights who use some degree of presentationalism are Anouilh, Giraudoux, Brecht, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams in his Glass Menagerie. In addition, theatres are being built for presentational plays. Proscenium arches are disappearing, and there is physically less separation between actor and audience in these theatres.

A consideration has been given to two characteristics of the Readers' Theatre in presentationally staged dramas: direct address to the audience by the actor and the use of the imagination by the audience. Other apparent characteristics of the Readers' Theatre are as follows: greater aesthetic distance between audience and reader, acknowledgment on the part of the audience that the performance is more of a reading performance than a staged production, and the use of suggestion rather than complete impersonation of character. Such characteristics should be analyzed further. In order to continue my investigation of the Readers' Theatre, I should now like to analyze the role of the interpretative reader of drama.

As a background for this study, an overall definition of the interpretative reader's role is first necessary. Charlotte Lee defined this as:

> the art of communicating to an audience, from the printed page, a work of literary art in its intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic entirety. . . His responsibility is to communicate the work of another, not to exhibit his own talents or erudition. He achieves communication by means of a trained voice and body, controlled by a responsive, informed, and disciplined mind. His aim is to present the material so that it conveys the effect which the author intended.[20]

In other words, the reader must be able to communicate to his audience the ideas and feelings of the work so that the audience will be able to understand them. "One of the goals of reading to others is the contagious transference of appreciation from reader to listener."[21]

From Miss Lee's definition, it seems evident that the role of the actor and the role of the interpretative reader of drama are quite similar except for the reader's use of printed material. In order to understand completely the reader's role, it is necessary to investigate the differences. The first characteristic of a reader of drama which distinguishes him from the actor in a staged drama focuses upon the concept of aesthetic distance, a term referring to "the psychic separation needed between a work of art and the observer in order for appreciation of the work to take place."[22] In a reading situation, there is for

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[20] Charlotte I. Lee, Oral Interpretation (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1952), pp. 8 and 12.

[21] Otis J. Aggertt and Elbert R. Bowen, Communicative Reading (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 5.

[22] Ibid., p. 9.

the spectator a greater degree of objectivity and intellectualization. Dolman described this principle.

> The actor by impersonating a character in a play is on the play's end of the aesthetic distance. The reader by sharing with the audience his reading experience is on their end of the aesthetic distance. By keeping in mind this attitude of distance toward the reading, we can enjoy the selection because we are not too directly involved in a personal sense.[23]

Aesthetic distance, then, is less great in an acting performance because the actor must make the audience accept him as the character he is portraying; but the aesthetic distance in a reading performance is greater because the reader remains himself. A further characteristic of the reader's role is expressed by Dr. Dolman.

> The reader, if he is reading to others, is psychologically one of them, sharing his appreciation and understanding of what he reads with them. His essential relationship with his listeners is one of communicative participation.[24]

Inherent within the characteristics of the reader's role discussed thus far is the acknowledgment on the part of the listener that the reading is a reading, not an acting performance. This concept introduces the second major distinction which speech authorities make between the roles of actor and reader: impersonation, or the dramatic representation of a character in a drama.[25] The reader's impersonation of a character

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[23] John Dolman, The Art of Reading Aloud (New York: Harper, 1956), p. 29.

[24] Ibid., p. 28.

[25] Maude Babcock, "Interpretative Presentation vs. Impersonative Presentation," Studies in the Art of Interpretation, ed. Gertrude E. Johnson (New York: Appleton-Century, 1940), p. 87.

is never so complete as the actor's since he is not a part of the scene he presents.[26] Lee described the difference as follows:

> The actor and the interpreter of drama differ primarily in degree of emphasis on certain techniques. In performance, the actor strives for the utmost explicitness, while the interpretative reader relies upon suggestion.[27]

In other words, in a reading performance, there is less representation of character. Character, emotion, and action are suggested by the reader's voice and implicit rather than explicit or literal gesture and movement. Too literal movement, for example, may destroy any illusions the audience has created in its mind. Anne Simley, present speech consultant for the Minnesota State High School League, supported this theory as follows:

> Only through suggestive gesture can the audience get the feeling of being somewhere else. The confusion that results from mixing literal gesture with suggestive gesture is the most common reason for ineffective reading aloud.[28]

As an example, Miss Simley told of a girl in a speech declamation contest who fell upon her knees on a dirty stage floor to assume an attitude of prayer. When the girl arose, she had two dirt spots on her knees which completely ruined the illusion she was attempting to create in her reading.[29]

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[26] Wayland Maxfield Parrish, Reading Aloud (New York: Ronald Press, 1953), p. 429.

[27] Lee, p. 335.

[28] Anne Simley, Oral Interpretation Handbook (Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Company, 1960), p. 3.

[29] Ibid.

A third major characteristic of a reading performance is the appeal to the imagination of the audience.

> The stage on which the reader's characters move is not limited as in a theater. It can reach anywhere our imaginations can go, and that is determined by our observations and experiences. . . Before television we listened to radio plays and could see what the readers suggested to us.[30]

The play, then, takes place in the hearer's mind; and the principal difference here between actor and reader is that, "The actor attempts to make his listeners see the character in himself; the reader attempts to make his listeners see the character in their own imaginations."[31]

A summary of the preceding section on the role of the interpretative reader would indicate four basic concepts regarding the reader and the audience:

1. greater aesthetic distance between audience and reader
2. suggestion rather than complete impersonation of character as a result of the greater aesthetic distance
3. the appeal to the audience to use its imagination
4. awareness by the audience of the reading situation

These four concepts are also present in the characteristics of the Readers' Theatre mentioned in the introduction to the study of the role of the interpretative reader of drama. It seems possible,

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[30] Ibid., pp. 2-3.

[31] Aggertt and Bowen, p. 8

therefore, to establish a link between this production style and the interpretative reader's role as well as the presentational method of staging drama. With this as a basis for the Readers' Theatre, an investigation of the production style will continue with a discussion of the types of presentations.

CHAPTER II

TYPES OF READERS' THEATRE PRODUCTIONS

An examination of the Readers' Theatre has revealed three basic types of production:: the solo performance, the group recital performance, and the performance with representational elements. These three types have become an increasingly popular form of entertainment on the Broadway stage since August, 1951, when Shaw's Don Juan in Hell was presented.

Americans are probably most familiar with the dramatic reading performance by one individual. More recent Broadway productions have been of this type and have toured nationally either before or after the New York productions. This is similar to earlier efforts by individual performers. From 1874 to 1935, representatives from the Chautauqua Institution toured the country giving among other forms of entertainment dramatic readings and impersonations. Most of the performances were memorized. Some performers used, like some modern performers, make-up and costumes, some making changes in full view of the audience.[1] Other performers used no make-up and stage costumes. Among these was Leland Powers, "the first to employ impersonation in playreading."[2] Mr. Powers

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[1] James Stewart Smoot, "Platform Theater: Theatrical Elements of the Lyceum-Chautauqua," Speech Monographs, XXII (August, 1955), 187.

[2] Phidelah Rice, "The Art of Impersonation in Play Reading," Johnson (ed.), p. 79.

used facial expression, poses, walks, gestures, and character voices to present an entire play to his audience.[3] An example was a solo production of Sheridan's The Rivals given at St. John's Methodist Church in New York City on March 16, 1891.

No recent Broadway solo performer has given an entire play as did Mr. Powers. A different method of using materials for both an individual as well as the group productions has been the thematic approach in which one theme or central idea serves to tie several different selections together. For example, John Gielgud in his presentation, The Seven Ages of Man, chose to do thirty-three excerpts from Shakespeare's plays and sonnets. Gielgud gave a simple, informal introduction to each speech.[5] Dressed in a dinner jacket, he stood alone on stage and used no props, costumes, or scenery. Reading from a script, he gave the impression of interpreting the characters rather than impersonating them as seems so evident from the following statement of Harold Clurman who had seen Gielgud act the role of Angelo in Measure for Measure and compared the earlier performance with Gielgud's reading of one of Angelo's speeches.

> Gielgud is an actor of high rank, but his readings are readings. By themselves they are certainly not theatre. . . In the reading only the verbal sense and the inspiration of language were communicated.[6]

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[3]Ibid., p. 80.

[4]Odell, XV, 255.

[5]Henry Hewes, "The Great Gielgud," Saturday Review of Literature, XLI (December 27, 1958), 20.

[6]Harold Clurman, "Theatre," The Nation, CXCVIII (January 10, 1959), 39.

Tom Driver of the New Republic also said about the performance:

> I was aware at every moment of the limitations of the actor and of the form of presentation which he had chosen. It is an intellectual triumph. . . Sir John Gielgud has walked upon the stage and asked us to watch as he greets, in the realm of the imaginative mind, the poet to whom he has so obviously listened with scrupulous attention. . . the spectator is thus forced to sit in his seat and think.[7]

Emlyn Williams, who has given three one-man shows on Broadway since 1952, dramatized materials from fiction and autobiography rather than drama. Whereas Gielgud made no attempt to impersonate Shakespeare and no attempt to impersonate completely the characters in the dramas themselves, Williams for both his "Mixed Bill" and "Bleak House" was an actor assuming the character of Dickens reading his own works. He not only dressed like Dickens, but used as a stand a replica of the author's own reading desk. As for Williams' performance, Joseph Wood Krutch commented that it stopped "just short of acting,"[8] and added:

> To call the performance a "reading" is inaccurate in at least two respects. In the first place, no page is presented straight through. . . In the second place, Mr. Williams does not read, he recites. As a matter of fact, his method, far from being novel, is almost precisely that employed for a generation or two on the Chautauqua circuit and taught at various institutions, notably the Emerson School of Oratory in Boston. He varies his voice and his facial expression to fit the character or even the tone of a descriptive passage. He also interprets in gesture not merely the action of the speakers but even inanimate objects, as when, for

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[7] Tom F. Driver, "Gielgud's Broadway Triumph," New Republic, CXL (February 2, 1959), 20.

[8] Joseph Wood Krutch, "Drama," The Nation, CLXXIV (February 23, 1952), 189.

> example, describing the corpulent epergne on Mr. Podsnop's table. . . he raises his joined hands over his head and imitates for our humor this repulsive but costly object.[9]

For his performance in 1957 of A Boy Growing Up, an adaptation of Dylan Thomas' autobiography, Williams abandoned the dress and appearance of the author. He used props: a chair, a screen, and a schoolboy's stack of foolscap and notebooks. His material consisted of a series of vignettes from the autobiography bridged by dialogue, which was much the same method he had employed in his adaptations for his other performances. He moved about the stage more freely than he had in his earlier performances, making frequent use of the chair as a prop.[10]

Holbrook's Mark Twain Tonight was a more complete impersonation than William's impersonation of Dickens. Harold Clurman said of the performance:

> Hal Holbrook does more than read Twain, as Emlyn Williams reads Dickens: he acts the man. His acting is shrewd and complete. The mischievous twinkle in the eye, the easy, preoccupied gait. . . not to mention the make-up and the tobacco voice.[11]

The main idea of Holbrook's presentation was to "hypnotize his audience into believing that he is no mere facsimile but Mark Twain himself, resurrected and unregenerately funny."[12]

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[9] Ibid., p. 190.

[10] "One Man and Funny," Newsweek, L (October 21, 1957), 99.

[11] Harold Clurman, "Theatre," The Nation, CXXCIX (August 15, 1959), 79.

[12] Tom Prideaux, "Twain's Amazing Twin," Life, XLVII (October 19, 1959), 81.

It was the group recital type of performance of Don Juan in Hell which really brought the concept of Readers' Theatre before the American audience. The production was performed by the Drama Quartette consisting of Charles Laughton, Charles Boyer, Agnes Moorehead, and Sir Cedric Hardwicke. Charles Laughton served as narrator. An interlude of fantasy and debate in Shaw's play, Man and Superman, the reading was considered by most critics to be "far and away the most exciting theatrical event of the season."[13] John Mason Brown of the Saturday Review of Literature said of the performance:

> Nothing Broadway has had to offer of recent years has been more absorbing than this theatrically unorthodox presentation of a play which is not a play in the ordinary sense--only a shallow forestage is used and it is backed by a black curtain.[14]

From this brief description we have some idea of what this "recital" type of Readers' Theatre production is like. The stage was stripped of all but four stands, complete with microphones, high stools, and scripts. The performers were not dressed in costumes but wore evening clothes, or as Laughton said, "soup and fish."[15] No entrances and exits were made. One person served as narrator.

> Mr. Laughton briefly and charmingly tells the essentials of the Don Juan story and announces the cast, thereafter he leads us into the script by letting us hear Shaw's stage direction. . . Among its igniting qualities count the fact that it puts the imagination to stimulating work at

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[13] Walter Kerr, "The Stage," Commonweal, LV (November 9, 1951), 118.

[14] Brown, "What Shaw Again? , p. 22.

[15] Charles Laughton, "How Mr. Laughton Became the Devil," New York Times Magazine, March 23, 1952, p. 21.

> the same time that it keeps the mind racing with delight.[16]

The performers in this production remained seated. They did not leave their stands, even though in the case of this production, the lines were memorized.[17] The drama was re-created through the dialogue with vocal and facial expression and non-literal gesture as the tools of the actors.

A play given in a group recital production off-Broadway was Dylan Thomas' Under [illegible] Milk Wood. Like Don Juan in Hell the drama contained little physical action or movement. Henry Hewes referred to the production: "The play is a little more radio documentary than it is a stage drama; it might be called the Welsh version of Our Town."[18] Six people including the author himself read the play which contained thirty-six character parts.

Other Broadway Readers' Theatre productions which have been given in a group recital type of performance have been Pictures in the Hallway and I Knock at the Door. These were different, however, because they were not plays but the dramatization of two autobiographical volumes by Sean O'Casey.[19] In 1960, Bette Davis, Leif Erickson, and Clark Allen, presented The World of Carl Sandburg. Standing before three lecterns, the performers read Sandburg's poetry. A red velour throne was a background ornament which McCarten thought the producer used to "demonstrate

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[16] Brown, p. 22.

[17] Ibid., pp. 22 and 26.

[18] Henry Hewes, "The Backward Town of Llareggub," Saturday Review of Literature, XXXVI (June 6, 1953), 24.

[19] John Gassner, Theatre at the Crossroads (New York: Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 24.

that Mr. Sandburg is an author nonpareil."[20]

The year after the success of Don Juan in Hell, a different type of Readers' Theatre opened on Broadway. The long narrative poem by Stephen Vincent Benet, John Brown's Body, was adapted for a readers' performance. Directed this time by Charles Laughton, a participant in the earlier production, the dramatic trio had some of the aspects of that production. They came before the audience dressed again in evening clothes and remained seated when not speaking or in a scene, but representational elements were added to the production. Actors would occasionally impersonate the characters they were portraying. At one point, Tyrone Power stood up for a battle scene and went through the motions of swinging an imaginary gun like a club to accompany the following lines:

> He wouldn't have time to load now - they were too near,
> He was up and screaming. He swung his gun like a club,
> Through a twilight full of bright stabbings and felt
> it crack,
> On a thing that broke. . .[21]

I remember another example of action combined with the reading performance from my attendance at the performance given by the same company in St. Paul, Minnesota.[22] At one point, one of the characters portrayed by Judith Anderson had a child. Miss Anderson gave a very convincing portrayal of a woman suffering the pains of childbirth, and after the birth pantomimed the holding and nursing of the child. Simeon Stylites explained further some of the pantomimes.

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[20]John McCarten, "Exercise in Elocution," New Yorker, XXXVI (September 24, 1960), 97.

[21]"Poetic Platform Drama," Life, XXXIV (January 26, 1953), 88.

[22]The show toured before their opening on Broadway. I attended the performance in November, 1952.

> Mr. Laughton has them act while not acting, kissing a hand, encircling a neck, sitting in pictorial attitudes under romantic lighting.[23]

Unlike the Don Juan in Hell performance, there was much physical movement in the show. This was aided by the positioning of a balustrade in back of the microphones, and a bench, and one chair. The performers crossed from chair to bench to balustrade, and moved from one microphone to another.[24]

In addition to the drama trio's use of explicit business and movement, another innovation was added to the performance: accompanying the readers was a choir which sang, spoke, and produced sound effects. If the poet told of men marching to war, the choir accompanied the actor's reading of the passage by imitating the sound of marching feet.[25] If a character was lying beneath a tree in a rainstorm, the choir imitated the sound of the rushing wind. Occasionally their effects were visual. When Judith Anderson, for example, described a southern ball at Wingate Hall, not only did the chorus hum in the background, but a member of the chorus danced. Individual chorus members also aided the readers. Miss Anderson handed her imaginary child to one of the chorus members to hold before she went on to read another part.

In general, the production of John Brown's Body was a staged reading embellished by the choir in the background, pantomime, and explicit

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[23] Stylites, p. 488.

[24] John Mason Brown, "Marching on," Saturday Review of Literature, XXXVI (March 14, 1953), 35.

[25] Eric Bentley, "On the Sublime," New Republic, CXXVIII (March 2, 1953), p. 23.

gestures and movements. This performance can be classified, then, as a Readers' Theatre with representational elements added to it.

A more recent example of a professional Readers' Theatre employing representational elements was the off-Broadway production, Brecht on Brecht, presented in January, 1962. Both the treatment of the material and the methods of production differed from John Brown's Body. Instead of an adaptation of one literary selection, the program consisted of pieces and segments from Brecht's plays, poems, stories, songs, and letters; but unlike Gielgud's The Seven Ages of Man, the presentation was not built around a central theme or idea which tied the selections together. Interspersed within the program were Brecht's recordings in which he sang his own songs, commented on his life and plays, and answered questions before the House Un-American Activities Committee.[26] The six performers, sitting on stools or occasionally standing, read their lines from portfolios for the non-dramatic selections given, then, in a group recital type of presentation. The excerpts from the plays, however, were dramatized, sometimes collectively and sometimes in a solo acting performance as in Lotte Lenya's portrayal of the "Jewish Wife" scene from The Private Life of the Master Race.[27] From the reviews the representational elements did not appear to be a part of the group reading as was sometimes the case in John Brown's Body.

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[26]Richard Gilman, "A Master's Voice," Commonweal, LXXV (February 2, 1962), 493.

[27]Edith Oliver, "Bold As You Please," The New Yorker, XXXVII (January 13, 1962), 64.

The production, Brecht on Brecht, as well as the later production, The Hollow Crown, illustrates that Readers' Theatre productions may combine the three types of reading presentations: the solo, the group recital, and the performance with representational elements. The latter, which opened on Broadway in February, 1963, and toured the United States in 1964, was composed of three actors and an actress from the Royal Shakespeare Company from Stratford-upon-Avon, England. The production was a thematic presentation built around the subject of the English royalty beginning with the reign of William the Conqueror and progressing to the coronation of Queen Victoria. The material consisted of poetry, songs, speeches, letters, excerpts from Holinshed's Chronicles, and other writings by and about English kings and queens.[28] The presentation was different from Brecht on Brecht. The performers sometimes sat on chairs of the Queen Anne period or stood, occasionally making use of a lectern.[29] Segments of the program, such as one of the first selections, "The Death of Kings," were delivered as a group recital with the participants seated and reading from portfolios. Many of the selections, however, combined, as in John Brown's Body, representational elements with the reading situation. For example, a performer would assume the character of one of the monarchs and then out of character comment upon that monarch for the audience's enjoyment, as in the selection of

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[28] John McCarten, "Tour de Force," New Yorker, XXXVIII (February 9, 1963), 66.

[29] I attended the road show production of The Hollow Crown given by the original cast in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on February 28, 1964, at the Academy Theatre.

James I's, "Counterblast to Tobacco." The performers impersonated the characters of Henry VIII, Jane Austen, and Charles II, assuming rather explicit facial, vocal, and physical mannerisms. For example, the character of Jane Austen was given a rather complete impersonation. The actress assumed the pose and voice of the teen aged author writing in her journal her impressions of royalty. Occasionally, when one actor alone performed, the others reacted as if they, too, were a part of the scene. In one instance, a performer described for their amusement the death of George II. The audience here was not directly addressed but became, like the audience in a representationally staged play, spectators who view the action through the "fourth wall."

Few props were used, although one performer impersonating Charles I made use of a white handkerchief to suggest the delicacy of Charles' tastes and manners. The piano, however, in one instance represented a coffin, and the harpischord became a writing table for Queen Victoria.

A trio of singers, accompanied by a piano and a harpischord, was interspersed throughout the program. Occasionally they also became a part of the reading performance as when a performer impersonating Henry VIII asked them to play and proceeded to accompany them.

In summary, there are three basic types of Readers' Theatre productions: the solo, the group recital, and the performance with representational elements. Variations and combinations of the types may exist in a production. In the next chapter, I should like to consider their characteristics in more detail.

CHAPTER III

THEORIES AND CRITICISM

From the preceding chapter, the establishment of different types of Readers' Theatre presentations focused on two aspects of the production style: use of material and methods of executing the material. In this chapter, these will be investigated further. Under the execution of the material, techniques of the performer and his relationship to the audience will be considered. Here the characteristics of the Readers' Theatre and the role of the interpretative readers, discussed in Chapter I, will serve as a basis for the investigation. Source materials will be provided from three areas: drama reviews of professional productions, theories of the Readers' Theatre by speech authorities, and first-hand observations of professional and amateur productions by the writer. The use of the material will be the first aspect of the Readers' Theatre production style to be investigated. As a first step, I should like to examine further the professional productions mentioned in Chapter II.

In addition to drama, several literary forms -- poetry, fiction, autobiography, the essay -- have been adapted for professional Readers' Theatre productions. The first presentation, Don Juan in Hell, was a complete and unbroken piece of drama, the dream sequence interlude of fantasy and debate, taken from Shaw's play, Man and Superman. Walter

Kerr gave three reasons for the success of the performance:

> First, Shaw's literacy. Second, this concert style of presentation is extremely felicitous when applied to something which is not so much drama as debate. Third, the almost embarrassingly high quality of performance turned in by the company.[1]

Two important aspects of the use of material are indicated: literary quality and suitability for a reading presentation. These together with a superior execution of the material by the performers justified the following comment of John Gassner's: "Don Juan in Hell overshadowed virtually every current play in amplitude and depth."[2]

The Drama Quartette's production seemed to be successful in both the choice and execution of the material. In discussing the materials of other Readers' Theatre performances, it should be first noted that at times an impartial analysis of the material employed was not given by critics since production factors influence their evaluations. Occasionally, therefore, an aspect of the performance seemed undesirable, and the reviewers deprecated the material as well. This may explain partially why the material for the only other professional production of a full length play, Dylan Thomas' Under the Milk Wood, did not fare so well with the critics. The drama was called unsuitable for commercial production since there was "no plot and no crisis." The playwright also acknowledged this weakness in the play.[3]

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[1] Kerr, p. 118.

[2] Gassner, p. 284.

[3] Hewes, "The Backward Town of Llareggub," p. 25.

Two productions which escaped criticism by reviewers, Pictures in the Hallway and I Knock at the Door, were not dramas but adaptations of the autobiographies of a dramatist, Sean O'Casey. Like Don Juan in Hell, these autobiographies were praised for their literary merit. Gassner commented that they

> comprise one of the supreme testaments of the human spirit in English prose, and they are the work of one of the three or four major playwrights the English-speaking world has had since the 17th century.[4]

He also added that the productions had "melodious language," variety in situations, "some idyllic, others tempestuous," and said of I Knock at the Door: "It had a continuously dramatic effect. . . the core of the play provided tension and conflict."[5]

John Brown's Body, a long narrative poem, unlike O'Casey's autobiographies, was believed by critics to be a poor choice for Readers' Theatre. Harold Clurman stated: "It has no real story and no true characters. Its pathos depends on its association, not on what it creates itself."[6] Eric Bentley criticized the production because it was "a poem to be read, not a play to be produced. . . What might have been an entertainment proves an embarrassment because of the epic pretension of form and content."[7] Finally, Wolcott Gibbs called the poem "not a

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[4] Gassner, p. 285.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Harold Clurman, "Theater," The Nation, CLXXVI (February 28, 1953), 193.

[7] Eric Bentley, "On the Sublime," p. 23.

piece of quite sufficient stature to merit such stately and even almost worshipful treatment."[8]

The World of Carl Sandburg, a Readers' Theatre presentation devoted primarily to the reading of Sandburg's poetry, was criticized by John McCarten, drama critic for the New Yorker. "The play is still the thing, and no elocution lesson can provide a substitute."[9] Both this production and John Brown's Body, however, were also criticized for the way the material was handled.

The two productions of Charles Dickens' works as read by Emlyn Williams were considered by most reviewers to be quite successful. In his second performance, Bleak House, Williams had to cut into a two hour reading a book that would have taken sixty hours to read in its entirety. Richard Hayes said of the cutting, "He has filleted the novel with fastidious taste and a disciple's tender respect."[10]

Williams' adaptation of Dylan Thomas' autobiography, however, was criticized by Gassner for its lack of unity.

> A Boy Growing Up was only fragmentarily dramatic. . . deficient in any unity other than that of the presence of young Dylan Thomas as a character throughout the reading. . . The whole thing lacked the beginning, middle, and end Aristotle predicted as the essential rhythm of drama. The evening owed everything to the power of the

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[8]Wolcott Gibbs, "The Theatre," New Yorker, XXIX (February 21, 1953), 58.

[9]John McCarten, "Exercise in Elocution," p. 97.

[10]Richard Hayes, "Bleak House," Commonweal, LVIII (May 15, 1953), 151.

> performance. The literary material seemed to be put together with virtually no dramaturgy at all.[11]

Gassner in commenting upon the adaptation of materials other than drama has mentioned that these must be given a dramatic treatment. "A reading cannot make good theatre except by accident unless it becomes good drama first."[12] An examination of the more successful Readers' Theatre productions in which materials other than plays have been used indicates there is some validity to Gassner's statement. The term, dramatic treatment, however, may be somewhat confusing. What he appeared to be implying from his comments on the O'Casey autobiographies and Dylan Thomas' autobiography is that a good Readers' Theatre has contrast and variety. Its materials are arranged in such a manner that they build, to a heightened point of interest, similar to the climax in a drama. An examination of the presentation, The Hollow Crown, a production consisting of several different types of literature, may help to explain this theory.

The Hollow Crown, like Don Juan in Hell, received favorable comments on both the use of material and the execution of the material. As Harold Clurman said of the production: "Though there is no 'acting' in it, it ends by making itself felt as a most precise and delightful drama."[13] The Hollow Crown was built around a unified theme, the pomp

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[11] Gassner, p. 288.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Clurman, "Theater," The Nation, CXCVI (February 16, 1963), 146.

and circumstance of English monarchy, with pieces of writing by or about British kings and queens. This theme helped to unify the materials. In addition, the coronation of Queen Victoria was reserved for the last major scene of the production. More time was allotted for this than for the other segments, and the presentation was given a more dramatic treatment. The performer impersonated more completely the character of the young queen. She was also separated from the other performers who sat in a darkened corner of the stage while the spotlight shone on her. This was the only instance in which the rest of the stage was darkened. The feeling conveyed to the audience was that this scene was a very definite climax to the production. Following this was a final group recital reading of the last portion of Malory's Morte D'Arthur in which the theme of the presentation was again repeated. This served as a kind of denouement to the production and helped to add to its unity.

Contrasting to this treatment of materials was the Brecht on Brecht production which was also a mixture of various literary forms: poems, stories, plays, songs, and letters. John Simon said of the performance:

> There is, first of all, little or no justification for taking tiny snippets of a man's work in prose, verse and song, scrambling them insouciantly together and tossing the whole mess out into the auditorium. This procedure is by no means comparable to what, say, Emlyn Williams did when he read out complete pieces or generous chunks from the works of Dickens. . . where the tone, moreover, was much more unified, and where the effort was clearly directed at getting across the most representative aspects of an author.[14]

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[14] John Simon, "Brecht on Brecht," Theatre Arts, XLVI (March, 1962), 60.

Here there appeared to be little attempt to arrange the materials into a unified whole. Brecht on Brecht, unlike The Hollow Crown, was not built around a single theme.

Considering that other production factors may be operating in the success or failure of these professional productions, a summary of reviewers' comments include the following ideas about the use of materials for the Readers' Theatre. It is impossible to draw definite conclusions on all of these, however, since limited evidence is available for some of the productions. Almost any literary form can be successfully adapted. The material, especially if the production is to be built upon one selection like John Brown's Body, must have literary merit. Productions, however, can be built around one work, as in the Don Juan in Hell performance, or around several works of different literary forms, as in The Hollow Crown performance. The most successful productions of the latter have been those which had a single theme. Brecht on Brecht, for example, was criticized for its lack of unity. The more successful productions also have contrast, variety, and the arrangement of the materials in such a manner that they build to a kind of climax.

In the previous examination of professional productions, no conventional plays which combine physical action with dialogue have been presented on the Broadway or off-Broadway stages. Both Don Juan in Hell and Under the Milk Wood, although dramas, were primarily dialogues. Conventional dramas of many different modes, however, have been produced by college and other non-professional groups. As a second step in the consideration of materials for Readers' Theatre, I should like to

examine the types of plays which have been presented by amateur groups in order to determine what modes of plays can and cannot be adapted for reading presentations. Unlike the previous discussion, reviews by drama critics will not serve as a basis for the investigation since these are not available. For this part of my analysis, however, I am concerned with the type of material being presented and not with critical evaluations of the productions.

Adelphi University, the first college to establish a regular Readers' Theatre, has produced since its beginning in 1949 Greek tragedies, Shakespearian comedies, romances, and modern realistic dramas. Among the plays produced in reading performances have been Giraudoux's Amphitryon 38, Euripides' Trojan Women, Shakespeare's Measure for Measure, and Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie. In 1952, the Adelphi College Readers' Travelling Theatre was established.[15] The group has travelled throughout the nation. As an example of what it produces in a group recital type of presentation, the program for 1963-1964 included a romantic comedy by George Bernard Shaw, The Dark Lady of the Sonnets, and Shakespeare's comedy, As You Like It.

Roderick Robertson of Skidmore College has produced in the Readers' Theatre established at that college plays by Eugene O'Neill, Lillian Hellman, and the Elizabethan playwright Thomas Dekker. Mr. Robertson

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[15] Aimee Scheff, "Adelphi Readers' Theatre," Theatre Arts, XXXVII (June, 1953), 79.

advised choosing a play in which the dialogue carries the dramatic burden. He recommended verse plays, comedies of wit, and plays with a high intellectual content such as those by George Bernard Shaw.[16]

R. L. Irwin, Chairman of the School of Speech and Dramatic Art, Syracuse University, has experimented at Syracuse with "group theatrical reading" for secondary students. He believed that, "Practically any play the action of which is sufficiently limited so that it can be supplied by a narrator, is suitable for group theatrical reading."[17] Both Robertson and Irwin staged their productions in a group recital form of presentation, rather than a form with representational elements.

I have had an opportunity to participate in the first Readers' Theatre production of the 1963-64 season by the Dakota Playmakers of the University of North Dakota: a presentation entitled "Portraits of Madonnas; A Study of Tennessee Williams' Women."[18] Cuttings were taken from the one-act play, "Portrait of a Madonna," and from four full-length works: Night of the Iguana, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, A Streetcar Named Desire, and The Glass Menagerie. Many of the scenes chosen would have involved much physical movement if given in a staged performance; yet no narration was added to the dialogue of the plays. The scenes were

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[16] Roderick Robertson, "Producing Playreadings," Educational Theatre Journal, XII (March, 1960), 20.

[17] R. L. Irwin, "Group Theatrical Reading," School Activities, XXII (March, 1951), 221.

[18] The Readers' Theatre production was directed by Dr. Donald W. McCaffrey, Associate Director of Theatre, University of North Dakota, and presented on October 19, 1963.

delivered in a group recital type of presentation with the actors standing behind speakers' stands. Both the performers and the audience felt the performance was a success.

It would seem that from the types of plays produced by various college and non-professional theatres that several modes of plays can be adapted for Readers' Theatre presentations--realistic plays with much physical action as well as the more physically static such as Greek dramas. Two modes which might not be adapted successfully for Readers' Theatre productions are certain avant-garde dramas like Beckett's Endgame, where the dialogue is almost incomprehensible without the complete physical actions of the staged work, and the most obvious types of farces such as Charley's Aunt. In the latter play, much of the humor lies in the spectacle of seeing a young man dressed in woman's clothes unsuccessfully trying to act like a prim and proper old lady. The Readers' Theatre is not restricted, however, just to the portrayal of closet dramas.

The second consideration of material for the Readers' Theatre is the execution of that material. The two aspects to be considered are the techniques of the performer and his relationship to the audience. Since these two are inter-related, they will be discussed together.

In Chapter I, a basis for the Readers' Theatre production style was set forth. A link was established between the presentational staging of drama and the Readers' Theatre and between the role of the interpretative reader of drama and the Readers' Theatre. I should like first to consider one characteristic of this latter link: suggestion rather than

complete impersonation of character as a result of the greater aesthetic distance in an interpretative reading.

A reading of a drama, or another form of literature given a dramatic treatment, is not the same as a staged play even though some of the performances discussed in Chapter II were semi-staged, such as John Brown's Body, or contained representational elements, such as the Brecht on Brecht or The Hollow Crown productions. There is a fine borderline, however, between a reading and an acting performance. The question arises as to the extent to which a performer in the Readers' Theatre takes on the function of the actor or the interpretative reader of drama. Should he, in other words, suggest rather than impersonate character?

As an introduction to the consideration of this question, I should like to quote what two authorities mentioned in Chapter I have said about the group reading performance. Aggertt and Bowen suggest:

> The techniques of interpretative reading rather than those of acting are appropriate. Thus, readers still suggest, rather than portray, characters. . . Participants in such productions should be on guard against too strong an identification with the character and also the tendency to "play to" the other readers instead of reading to an audience.[19]

Simley also believes, that although the reading should be alive and vigorous, the group play reading is not an acting performance.

> Since movement or change of position is not called for, they can use much suggestive

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[19] Aggertt and Bowen, p. 455.

> action and must use abundant and appropriate facial expression. . . Each character can be closely identified in voice and body tensions.[20]

To these theorists the Readers' Theatre is more closely associated to the role of the interpretative reader. Both agree that implicit rather than explicit business and movement is more appropriate. To what extent are these theories valid? As a possible answer, I should like to turn again to the execution of materials in some of the professional productions previously discussed.

Emlyn Williams in his interpretation of Dylan Thomas' autobiography was accused by some critics of overacting. Time magazine in its review of the performance said: "At times it is too showy."[21] John Gassner also stated that Williams invited criticism by "overacting," and cited an example. "In one episode, he simulated flight with an embarrassing flapping of his hands."[22]

John Brown's Body evoked the most criticism because of the amount of movement. Eric Bentley said: "One might claim that there is too much acting in the performance rather than too little,"[23] and then described the situation.

> Part of the trouble is that our Drama Trio inhabits a weird no-man's land between acting or non-acting. As non-actors they proceed to impersonate soldiers in uniform or Confederate maidens in distress; that is in itself an exciting feature; what is awkward

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[20] Simley, p. 46.

[21] "Recitation in Manhattan," Time, LXX (October 21, 1957), 56.

[22] Gassner, p. 288.

[23] Bentley, p. 23.

> is the transition back into non-acting--or, more precisely, that Mr. Laughton has them act while not acting, kissing a hand, encircling a neck, sitting in pictorial attitudes under dramatic lighting.[24]

Having attended the performance of John Brown's Body, I would agree with Mr. Bentley's statement. One piece of action in particular bothered me as a spectator. Judith Anderson at one point handed her imaginary child to a member of the chorus to hold. Shortly afterwards, the woman dropped her arms to her sides, thus giving the impression of having dropped the baby on the floor.

In another instance I have been bothered by the use of representational elements in a reading performance. The Dakota Playmakers presented on December 10, 1963, the second of their Readers' Theatre productions. Two original plays by faculty members of the University of North Dakota, "Afternoon at the Beach" by John Wills and "This Morning We Killed God" by William Borden, were presented in a group recital type of performance to which representational elements were added. In the second presentation, one reader pantomimed Christ being nailed to the cross. In another instance, he took out a very white handkerchief and wrapped an imaginary wound to his hand. The other reader indicated the aimlessness of mankind by racing several times around the speaker's stand. In each instance, my attention was drawn from the reading itself to the business or action. In the first production, "Afternoon at the

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[24] Ibid.

Beach," properties were added. One reader walked on stage carrying a briefcase and an umbrella and wearing a hat. The other reader carried a tennis racket. These items were placed by the speaker's stands and were not used throughout the performance until the readers exchanged places to indicate a difference in locale, at which time they picked up the properties and put them down at their new location. My attention had been drawn to them from the start, and I wondered how they were to be used and why they were there. They seemed to me, therefore, not only unnecessary, since they were given very light reference in the script, but also a definite distraction.

There appears to be some validity to Aggertt and Bowen's and Simley's theory that the techniques of interpretative reading rather than those of acting are more appropriate for the Readers' Theatre. Representational elements, such as explicit business, movement, and properties, cannot always be used effectively in reading productions. A brief review of how these representational elements were used in two productions may help to explain further this idea.

In the production at the University of North Dakota, the representational elements were added to a group recital type of presentation. John Brown's Body had staged or acting elements inserted rather suddenly and without transition into what had been a non-acting performance. In each of these productions, representational elements were added to what the audience had been prepared for as a presentational performance. As was set forth in Chapter I, the aesthetic distance between performer and spectator is greater in a presentational production. The spectator is,

therefore, more objective toward the production because he is aware that the performance is a reading, not an acting situation. A further explanation of this objectivity is discussed by Frederick Hile and Sholie Brown, who direct the '49ers Workshop, a program service activity at the University of Washington specializing in oral interpretation. Mr. Hile and Mr. Brown stress oral interpretation techniques in their Readers' Theatre productions, which are given in a group recital type of presentation similar to those given at the University of North Dakota.

> In oral interpretation, the interpreter does not pretend to be the character; he is showing the character to his listeners, who may in their imagination, visualize the character according to varied experience. We have three elements: interpreter, material, listener. In acting the listener is aware of two: the character and the material. The actor becomes the character. As long as the majority of the audience is presumed to be aware of the three elements, we have oral interpretation, not acting. Techniques of costuming, staging, lighting, sound effects, or properties that do not destroy the "awareness" of the three are aesthetically defensible.[25]

This "awareness" or objectivity on the part of the spectator in a Readers' Theatre has made him aware of the reading triangle--interpreter, material, audience--which is not the case in a staged production where he is aware of only two elements: the character in the drama and the material. Because of this objectivity, the audience is more sensitive

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[25] Frederick W. Hile and Sholie R. Brown, "The '49ers and Three Experiments in Oral Interpretation," The Speech Teacher, II (March, 1953), 106.

to the addition of representational elements. When the reader whips out a white handkerchief to wrap an imaginary wound, attention is immediately drawn to the handkerchief and the artificiality of the situation. An awkward gesture or movement, or an embarrassing one as Gassner described one of Williams', will have the same effect on the audience of focusing attention on that element which seems out of place to the reading situation. The degree to which a performer can impersonate a character through the use of business, movement, properties in a reading performance is related, therefore, to what his audience will accept as being a part of the reading situation.

Before accepting the theory that the only procedure for executing material in a Readers' Theatre is through suggestion rather than complete impersonation, it is necessary to examine some other Readers' Theaters which appear to have incorporated representational elements successfully.

I could find no criticism on the addition of representational elements for the two productions, Brecht on Brecht and The Hollow Crown. John McCarten referred to The Hollow Crown as "acting in the highest style."[26] There is, however, within the two productions a basic difference in the use and execution of materials from the handling of John Brown's Body and the original one-acts presented at the University of North Dakota. As was mentioned in Chapter II, the Brecht on Brecht production contained excerpts from plays which were acted apart from

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[26] John McCarten, "Tour de Force," p. 66.

the reading. Some of the selections in The Hollow Crown were delivered, as in the Brecht on Brecht performance, as little playlets, also apart from the reading situation. Some selections, however, combined the representational with the reading segments. These were effective, at times delightful, and did not detract from the enjoyment of the reading itself. For example, a performer describing a funeral walked over to the piano, lifted the lid, and looked in as if he were gazing at a body lying in a coffin. The movement was uproariously funny, whereas in John Brown's Body the same mixture of acting with non-acting techniques became a definite distraction.

One of the solo productions also demonstrated that a greater degree of impersonation may be given to characters by a reader. Hal Holbrook gave an almost complete impersonation of Mark Twain and received rave reviews from the critics. Holbrook, however, prepared the audience for a greater degree of impersonation by coming before them wearing costume and make-up.

It would appear, then, that Readers' Theatre is not strictly confined to the technique of the interpretative reader. In the comparison between the productions which incorporated representational elements somewhat unsuccessfully with those productions which were successful, three factors were present: the different use of the materials, the different execution of the materials, and the use of costume and make-up which helped to prepare the audience for the use of more explicit business and movement. Such factors may be condensed and grouped into three divisions. Material, performer technique, and style of production,

which are of primary importance in the production of a fully staged drama, are a primary consideration in Readers' Theatre. To illustrate this further, I should again like to consider the two professional Readers' Theatre productions which I have attended: John Brown's Body and The Hollow Crown.

John Brown's Body was a long, serious narrative poem. The Hollow Crown was a series of humorous selections. The primary appeal was to the intellect, with an appeal to the emotions secondary. Such was not the case with John Brown's Body where emotional identification with the characters was most important. In a production such as this where the emotions were involved, the imagination of the audience was put to a greater use; any incongruous movements could very easily destroy the illusion created in the mind. It came as quite a shock after Judith Anderson had very successfully convinced me she had given birth to a child to see in my mind the child dropped on the floor by a member of the chorus.

In The Hollow Crown, the business and movement of the actors seemed natural and more in keeping with the possibilities of a reading situation. No actor, like Tyrone Power in John Brown's Body, lay precariously on a balustrade. Neither did the actors play any passionate love scene in which they kissed the backs of their hands or encircled their own necks.

As a second illustration of style of production which may affect an audience' acceptance of representational techniques, I should like to consider the group recital type of presentation. The position of

the readers behind lecterns without the aid of make-up or costume strongly suggests a reading rather than an acting performance. Aesthetic distance and objectivity on the part of the spectator would seem to be greatest in this type of Readers' Theatre. Without some preparation on the part of the readers, it would be more difficult for the audience to accept explicit business, movement, or other representational elements such as props.

To summarize, the degree to which representational elements can be added to a Readers' Theatre production, which is by its nature presentational in style, depends upon the factors of substance of material, technique, and style of production. Of primary consideration in the Readers' Theatre is the greater degree of aesthetic distance and objectivity on the part of the audience.

A second technique to be considered in the execution of the material is the performer's use of his voice. Simeon Stylites in discussing Readers' Theatre productions on Broadway stated: "There is a dependable response to speech <u>if</u> you have something to say and say it with dramatic force."[27] It is the latter portion of that statement, the ability of the performer to project the material through vocal expression, which is one of the most difficult aspects of the Readers' Theatre presentation.

If the reading is to be understood and enjoyed by the audience to the extent that they can empathize with the characters in the story or

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[27] Stylites, p. 488.

drama, the burden placed upon the performer is greater than for an actor in a staged play. Three elements which aid the actor--composition, movement, and business--are either missing or much reduced in importance. Great demands are then placed on the reader's voice and his ability to project the proper image through vocal expression. Even professional actors have had difficulties in Readers' Theatre productions. For example, Richard Hayes, drama critic for Commonweal, commented on Miss Bette Davis' performance in The World of Carl Sandburg.

> One is dismayed to see how little Miss Davis has mastered the grammar of the stage. Her readings have never a unique finality, are often mundane, sometimes banal. She addresses the audience with sweet and infinite reasonableness, as if it were a collection of mental defectives.[28]

On the other hand, Readers' Theaters which have been considered by most critics successful, have been so because of the performer's ability to project the material with expression and meaning. As an example, the Drama Quartette's performance was given better reviews than most of the staged performances of the season. As Harold Clurman said: "When Don Juan in Hell was read with naked directness, it struck us not only as dramatically cogent but in every sense good theatre."[29] A more specific appraisal of the performance was John Mason Brown's statement about Charles Laughton: "Laughton's flexible voice and face are quick to

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[28] Richard Hayes, "Galesburg and Arcadia," Commonweal, LXX (October 14, 1960), 73.

[29] Clurman, "Theater," Nation, CLXXXVI (February 28, 1953), 28.

register every nuance of expression."[30]

The reader, then, must use variety; but, as in a staged play, artifices for the sake of variety only which do not contribute to an understanding of the selection do not belong in a Readers' Theatre. Henry Hewes exemplified this idea in his praise of Gielgud's performance in The Seven Ages of Man. "Unlike so many classical actors, he never underlines words in order to substitute an air of meaningfulness for real clarity."[31] This principle of clarity in a reading production was explained by Charles Laughton when he discussed his early career as a reader to men in veterans' hospitals:

> But the men in the hospital, unlike the people in the theaters, when they didn't understand said so out loud and if I didn't understand either I learned to admit it and that is not so easy as it sounds when you have gone along shamming for so long.[32]

An actor who "shams" in a staged production is bad enough, but, as was mentioned earlier, there are other factors which may make the passage understandable to an audience. Such is not the case in a reading performance, however, and vocal techniques do not cover up for real clarity of meaning. For example, Charlotte Lee said about the oral interpreter:

> Technique is skill in execution, not a trick. There is a temptation to adopt certain physical and vocal mannerisms for their own sake, rather than allowing them to grow out of the needs of the material.[33]

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[30] Brown, "What Shaw Again?", p. 26.

[31] Hewes, "The Great Gielgud," p. 74.

[32] Laughton, p. 21.

[33] Lee, P. 379.

A third factor in the performer's vocal technique is his ability to get the audience to empathize with the ideas of the author and the characters in the selection, whether it be a drama, a short story, or some other form. This is particularly important in a selection of a more serious nature where there may be a stronger appeal to the emotions. For the enjoyment of almost any entertainment, an audience has to participate in some way. In a play or a Readers' Theatre, they may show this participation through laughter and empathy. The ability to read a selection so effectively that an audience can empathize with the characters is one of the more difficult aspects of the performer's technique. In the Readers' Theatre, much of the burden is placed on the performer's use of his voice.

A fourth factor in Readers' Theatre, as well as in a staged drama, is the performer's objectivity toward the selection. He cannot lose himself completely in it. To illustrate, Hal Holbrook explained how he prepared for his portrayal of Mark Twain.

> I tried for a long, long time to lose myself in the part--and I mean lose myself--and it seemed I'd never be satisfied until I'd got inside of his skin or whatever you call it. About a year ago, I began to realize nobody can be another person. More than that, to do something well, there's got to be some of you in it. Now I'm in control.[34]

That Holbrook was able to maintain an objectivity toward the author and still get the audience to empathize with him is evident from Prideaux' remark: "By the evening's end, many spectators feel they not only have

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[34]Hal Holbrook, as quoted by Gilbert Millstein, "One as Twain," New York Times Magazine, (April 19, 1959), p. 24.

met Mark Twain but--more extraordinarily--have understood him."[35]

A fifth factor is very closely associated with the Readers' Theatre production style with its presentational approach: the ability of the performer to project directly to his audience his attitude about the selection. This, too, is one of the most difficult of the performer's techniques. Gielgud, a performer who successfully portrayed this in his solo performance, The Seven Ages of Man, is described by Henry Hewes.

> He delivers the first few Shakespeare selections with deceptive simplicity and ease. But gradually we begin to sense behind the beautifully phrased speech a fantastically responsive human being contemplating his own position in Shakespeare's universe. When he says a word like "gaudy," he does it in such a way as to reveal his own notion of good taste. As Benedick he infects the diatribe against marriage with a heat that is not only hilarious but also is true to what he knows to be his own potential for vulnerability.[36]

The second technique considered in the execution of the material, the performer's use of the voice, is one of the most difficult elements in the Readers' Theatre production style which makes this medium less simple than it may at first appear. The performer must be as adept as a radio actor, but without the latter's use of sound effects to aid him. He must use expression and variety, but with clarity and without artifice; he must have the ability to get his audience to empathize with the reading, but he must still maintain an objectivity toward the reading himself; and he should have the ability to project an idea to the audience

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[35] Prideaux, p. 82.

[36] Henry Hewes, "One Man in His Shakespeare," Saturday Review of Literature, XLI (January 17, 1959), 74.

of his own attitude toward the selection. This ability takes much effort, study, thought, practice, and skill.

Miss Simley suggested another technique in the execution of the material: "abundant and appropriate facial expression."[37] Facial expression is one of the few visual aids a performer may use in a Readers' Theatre with very few restrictions. Two comments were made on the Brecht on Brecht production by critics which illustrate what these restrictions are.

> The six histrions involved. . . gave us such a concert of prefabricated smirks and stances, such gazes of mutual and self-admiration and other cutenesses masquerading as impromptu responses, as to make the late unlamented quiz shows seem by comparison orgies of spontaneity.[38]

Robert Brustein of the New Republic added: "The actors in this staged reading, wink, smile, and twinkle at each other so much that I wanted to throw my coat at them."[39] Facial expression, then, must be appropriate, fit the selection, and not call attention to itself.

A final aspect to be considered in the execution of materials is whether or not the materials should be memorized. Although the professional productions scripts are present, I have noticed that actors do not often refer to them. Agnes Moorehead, a member of the original First Drama Quartette who performed in John Brown's Body, explained why, even though she carried a script, she memorized her material.

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[37] Simley, p. 46.

[38] Simon, p. 60.

[39] Robert Brustein, "Theater," New Republic, CXLVI (January 22, 1962), 23.

> You can't read and act at the same time. It's all got to be in your head or you'll lose your audience. I hate to think what Don Juan in Hell would have been like if we hadn't had it "in our heads" when we toured ten years ago. There were all sorts of cues and movements that the audience wasn't aware of that made memorization absolutely essential.[40]

It would appear, then, that performers would at least have to have the material fairly well memorized for a good presentation. Memorization does not mean that the production is no longer Readers' Theatre. The presence of the script as well as other production factors such as those discussed on pages 45 and 52 helps to maintain the overall style of the Readers' Theatre. Miss Moorehead's statement, however, implies that there is much more to a Readers' Theatre production than just a simple method of presenting a play.

In this Chapter, I have attempted to investigate the theories concerning the use of the materials for the Readers' Theatre and the execution of these materials. The aspects of addition of representational elements, the emphasis placed upon the voice, facial expression, and the types and adaptations of materials for reading presentations have been examined for the Readers' Theatre production style.

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[40] Agnes Moorehead, as quoted by Dan Sullivan, "Agnes Moorehead's Readings Are 'Nonreadings' - She Memorizes Them," Minneapolis Sunday Tribune, November 3, 1963, p. 18.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS

In the paper, the following elements in the Readers' Theatre have been discussed: the origin and basis for this production style, the types of productions, the use of the material, the role of the performer, and the relationship between the audience and the performer. From a consideration of these elements in the body of the paper, certain issues have been raised. It is the purpose, then, of this chapter to synthesize these issues and draw conclusions from them.

First, as was advanced in Chapter I, the basis for the Readers' Theatre production style is the presentational or non-illusory style of dramatic production and the role of the interpretative reader of drama. As in an interpretative reading, aesthetic distance on the part of the audience is greater, and the audience is more aware of the reading situation and the performers. Common to both the presentational style and the role of the interpretative reader are a closer relationship between performer and audience and the appeal to the audience to use its imagination.

In Chapter II, Readers' Theatre productions were broken down into three basic types: the solo performance, the group recital performance, and the performance with representational elements. The greatest presentational approach exists in the group recital type of production

as the performers either sit or stand behind lecterns and use no costumes and little movement. In contrast to it is the production with representational elements in which the reading performance is combined with such elements as gestures, movement, and impersonation of character designed to create an illusion of reality apart from the reading situation. Like many other things, few reading performances remain purely one type. Variations within the types exist. As has been explained in Chapter II in The Hollow Crown, all three styles were combined in one production.

The Readers' Theatre has two characteristics of production style which would help to sell this form of entertainment to an audience: the close relationship between performer and audience, and the appeal to the audience to use its imagination. This second characteristic, although greatly stressed by theorists, is almost overlooked by the drama critics who have reviewed actual Readers' Theatre productions. Tom Driver of the New Republic and John Mason Brown of the Saturday Review of Literature, however, have mentioned it as having added enjoyment to two of the more presentational Readers' Theatre productions: Don Juan in Hell and The Seven Ages of Man. In each of these productions, no representational elements were added, so it is obvious that the imagination would have to be used to a greater extent. Other reviewers for the same productions do not mention the imaginative appeal at all. This does not mean that it is unimportant. I believe that the critics' objection to the addition of explicit business and movement is in part connected to the infringements upon their imaginative powers. The basis for this idea can be found in comments which were made about "too much acting" in the

productions. Eric Bentley, for example, criticized John Brown's Body: "What we find at the Century Theatre is reading that is seldom content to be mere reading."[1] It is possible that the practicing critic's reaction to the Readers' Theatre is more subjective. Unlike the theorist, he does not analyze so thoroughly his reactions to the performance; the theorist is often more aware of such a concept as the need for the audience to use its imagination.

A second characteristic of Readers' Theatre mentioned by the theorists is the use of suggestion rather than complete impersonation of character. Explicit business and movement often do not seem to fit a reading production style. Some of the drama critics have disapproved of the addition of representational elements, particularly in certain productions. In others, however, they have either praised acting segments or have said nothing. The drama critics, unlike the theorists, have not had the background in oral interpretation techniques. If a representational element in a reading performance does not disturb them in any way, it appears to be acceptable. As generalizations the theorists' opinions have some validity, however. Because of the greater awareness on the part of the audience of the reading situation, there is a danger that explicit business and movements may break audience empathy, interfere with the use of the imagination, and draw attention to some segment of the production which should not be emphasized. But, as was discussed

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[1] Bentley, "On the Sublime," p. 23.

in Chapter III, an examination of the substance of the material, the technique of the performer, and the style of the production may allow for the inclusion of representational elements which may aid in the audience' enjoyment of a production. Qualifications must, then, be made on such generalizations. A blanket statement which maintains that no literal movement be used in a Readers' Theatre performance is not valid.

Since Readers' Theatre appears to be a very simple type of entertainment to produce, it is a common concept that it is a short-cut for a fully staged play. Actually, a Reader's Theatre production is rather difficult for several reasons. First, materials have to be adapted for this entertainment style. For plays, this may involve cutting and the addition of background information. The editor must still, however, remain true to the author's meaning and purpose. Materials which are non-dramatic must be arranged to have contrast, variety, and a building of interest comparable to the climax in a drama. Some unity must also be given to these non-dramatic materials.

The second difficulty in a Readers' Theatre presentation is the emphasis on the voice. To maintain the interest of an audience mainly through the use of the voice takes much training and skill. The performer must have expression, variety, clarity, and an understanding and feeling for the selection which he can project to his listeners. He is not aided by most of the other elements in a staged production: properties, costumes, scenery, stage composition, movement, and business. Any awkward movements, mispronounced words, vocal faltering, colorless expression, both vocally and facially, will be magnified.

The third difficulty develops with the performer's position of being not quite an actor and little more than an interpretative reader of drama.

In concluding this investigation of the Readers' Theatre production style, the question arises as to what extent a Readers' Theatre is a reading production. As was mentioned in Chapter III, some professional performances have been memorized. The performers carry scripts or have them before them, but do not often refer to them. For certain segments of the show, they may not carry scripts at all. Of what use, then, are they? Perhaps the script becomes a constant reminder to the audience that the production is not a staged play. There are other factors, however, which also suggest to the audience that this type of entertainment is something different. Materials, such as poetry, essays, letters, autobiographies, are presented which are not designed for a staged production. The materials are given in a presentational style. The performer addresses his listeners directly and appears to share with them his appreciation of the material. In no staged production is there such direct rapport between performer and listener which is present so consistently throughout the performance. Added to this is the characteristic of the production style mentioned earlier: the importance of the audience' use of its imagination since the production is not staged. The Readers' Theatre is, then, an entertainment separate from other entertainments whether or not its performers use scripts.

Although the Readers' Theatre has been recognized as a separate style of entertainment, it is difficult to devise a clear-cut definition of the production style and to separate it from fully staged dramatic work. My investigation has shown that it has many characteristics of the stage drama, but the term, Readers' Theatre, is used rather loosely and includes many different types of presentations. Well done, a Readers' Theatre production is very enjoyable and effective. It is, as Charles Laughton has stated, one other form of entertainment in which "the best stuff" may be presented to the public any place and anywhere.[2]

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[2] Laughton, p. 21.

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